

GRAPE BARGAINING STARTS ON COAST

Growers and Pickers Meet First Time in Dispute

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

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LOS ANGELES, June 20— After almost four years of strikes and boycotts against California table grapes, a committee of grape growers sat down today to discuss a settlement with the union representing agricultural workers.

The event marked a significant advance in the efforts of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee and its leader, Cesar Chavez, to gain contracts with grape growers.

It could also presage a new relationship in agriculture between farmers and their workers, who have been excluded from the protection of Federal labor legislation.

Pressure in Washington

After many futile attempts, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee has been the first union to organize effectively among the poverty-stricken migrants who pick most of the nation's fruit and vegetables. And pressure is building up in Washington to place farm workers under the National Labor Relations Act.

The importance of today's meeting was highlighted by the participation of Gilbert Selden, a special representative of J. Curtis Counts, director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The agency was asked by both sides to supervise the meeting. It agreed after getting the approval of Secretary of Labor George P. Shultz and the White House.

As the two sides met today at the Federal Office Building in downtown Los Angeles, they presented a sharp contrast.

Carrying Briefcases

The five representatives of the growers were mainly older, well-dressed men carrying briefcases. They spoke to newsmen only through a professional consultant hired to act as their spokesman.

Of the five union leaders, only one wore a tie. And Dolores Huerta, one of the union's vice presidents and its chief negotiator, looked distinctly uncomfortable in a blue dress.

"One benefit from this meeting was that I could sleep this morning," she said. "Usually we're up at 3 A.M. to go picketing."

Both sides expressed confidence that a settlement could be reached fairly quickly. "We're ready to talk seriously if they are," Jerome Cohen, the union's general counsel, said.

Problems Unresolved

But several difficult problems remain to be solved.

First of all, the growers who agreed to talk represent only about 10 per cent of California's grape producers, and a large majority of the others has vowed to resist the union's demands.

The holdouts insist that Congress should pass legislation setting down ground rules for agricultural labor disputes before negotiations begin. In particular, they want a bill that would prohibit strikes at harvest time and secondary boycotts.

Another problem is that the growers have been plagued by rising costs and have expressed doubt that they can provide large wage increases.

Also, it would be almost impossible to exclude any growers who sign contracts from continuing the nationwide boycott. As one observer said today: "How can you stamp a grape with the union label?"